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L.A.P.D.

hassling reporters

It was one day off in terms of the calendar, but last December 8th deserves to be recorded as a day of infamy in the hardening of police attitudes toward the press and public information.

That was the day of the gun battle at the Black Panther headquarters on Central Avenue in Los Angeles. It all began around 5:30 a.m. when some 400 officers moved into the area to back up a handful of men going in to serve warrants.

One black legislator said afterward, "Why, when the police serve a warrant in the black community, do they go in shooting?" The police claim the Panthers fired first. The Panthers deny that. It ended with six Panthers wounded, three officers wounded, and 19 Panthers arrested on various felony charges.

The shooting went on for nearly four hours, but no reporters and no photographers were allowed within 200 yards of the scene. We were, as the police like to put it, cordoned off some distance down the street. "For your own protection," they said.

As one member of the protected group, a myopic one, at that, this reporter was reduced to observing the events at hand through the long lens of an accompanying cameraman. Watching the bullets splash off the wall of the Panther building, I noticed a man running around and behind a car parked just a few feet away. I noticed also that he had a camera, so I inquired, not too politely, of a nearby inspector, "Why is that man there while we are kept back here?"

The answer again was, "For your own protection. He's the police department photographer." There was some hot arguing over that point. I am no hero, merely an older and wattling reporter, but neither am I about to accept, this far along the road, dictates in doing my business handed down by men who know little or nothing of my business.

Besides, and I mentioned this rather loudly at the time, no one in a position of authority seemed to worry much about protecting reporters during the Watts riot or Detroit or Cleveland. And certainly there is no great effort in Vietnam to keep us from covering the war.

Watts. That raised several cantankerous thoughts. According to the official riot summary of the Los Angeles Police Department, the maximum deployment of city cops during the violence was 496 men. That came after several days of burning, looting, and shooting. But to serve warrants on Central Avenue, 400 men were on hand ahead of time, including the Swat squad (for Special Weapons and Tactics), a high power group with flak jackets and automatic weapons.

What really rankled was the presence of the police photographer closer to the story than we were. No reporter or cameraman

has to be held back for his own safety. Not one of us wants to get shot, and most of us have had considerable experience in covering violence without getting shot. Indeed, I am tempted to ask how many policemen have heard more shots fired in anger than any reporter who has been around a while.

But let's consider the use the police made of the shootout film their man acquired exclusively. They took it to their laboratory, processed it, edited it, and delivered to all the local television stations their version of what took place. A publicity handout, you say? Precisely. The sort of thing a public relations firm might do for a grocery chain opening a new market or for some busty young starlet.

That sort of puffery is acceptable. It is not, I submit, acceptable when the subject matter is the relationship between the police and the Panthers. It is, in fact, outrageous for the police to hold back reporters and cameramen, and then, at their leisure, palm off their own edited version of a story that should have been open to coverage on the spot, at the time of the action.

The film was widely used, but no station made a point of its origin. There were the usual throwaway lines to the effect that "this film was made available by the Los Angeles Police Department." But it's doubtful that very many viewers really understood what that meant.

Amazingly, while the gun battle produced a flood of angry editorials in print and on the air, not one newspaper or broadcasting station raised even a murmur of complaint about the police news management.

In fact, the only protest I have been able to verify was made by Don Neff, *Time's* bureau chief. When the shooting stopped and photographers moved up to the building, *Time's* man was blocked at the door by an inspector in charge of press relations who said "We look after the local press. You can get your pictures from them." Neff received a reply from Chief Ed Davis saying, in part, "... it was unfortunate ... in the future, national magazines will be accorded the right to obtain pictures during unusual occurrences."

"Accorded the right!" In the reign of Chief Davis we have certainly moved a long way from the traditional understanding of the function of a free and responsible press. He seems to envision himself as some sort of monarch with the power to dispense privileges among his subjects as he and he alone chooses.

He dispenses criticism, too, as in a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* angrily denouncing an editorial page cartoon as "anti-Christ and anti-police." In the vocabulary of Davis, we may assume, the two are to be equated, and unless we want to downgrade the Savior we must elevate the police to a far grander station than they ever enjoyed in the past.

The problem, of course, is that the policeman's role in our society is far from clearly defined. Is he the friendly man on the beat of a few years ago? The father

figure who knew every kid on the block? The grown-up who could help retrieve a kite tangled in a tree or coax a frightened kitten down from a garage roof?

Or is he today more properly a cataloguer of dissent and dissenters? A watchdog over militants and radicals? A defender not just of law and order but of patriotism and pure Americanism as those virtues are praised in American Legion meeting halls?

A clear redefinition of the policeman's role is long overdue. It must be made with full awareness of the complex ferments of today's America, with full recognition of the pressures of a society in which the young radicals and restive blacks are demanding fundamental change and denying many of the old values. Obviously, such a redefining is needed for the sake of all of us, civilians and policemen alike.

One nagging concern: when we have a chief like Ed Davis, who seriously proposed a court order barring William Kunstler from speaking anywhere in Los Angeles, what sort of definition are we likely to get, and will there be room in it for the First Amendment? The very thought brings boggles and shudders.

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